

# DOG Sport

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# Below The Surface in Canine Water Sports



By Deborah Lee Miller-Riley

**Canine Water Sports saw the potential in this canine submarine fun and created underwater tasks to show off any dog's scuba talents.**

From the curious Afghan Hound who poked his head under the ocean surf to look around, to the Cairn Terrier who apprehended trespassing fish under her dock, dogs will submerge head to tail, in tubs to oceans, to satisfy a variety of pleasure seeking needs. Canine Water Sports saw the potential in this canine submarine fun and created underwater tasks to show off any dog's scuba talents. These dives are included in the following gradations:

#### **Dive while Wading**

This is a full head submersion that requires the dog to submerge her entire head, retrieve a submerged article and deliver to hand.

#### **Dive while Swimming**

This is a full body submersion that requires the dog to submerge her body below the surface to make a retrieve. Tails and long coats above the surface are permitted. In the swim dive, the dog begins while swimming next to the handler. The article may be tossed to sink or be suspended underwater.

#### **Dive from a Platform**

This is a full-body submersion that begins with a leap off a water platform with the handler next to the dog. The retrieve article is tossed to sink or may hang suspended. The water platform is placed at or just above the water surface and is free standing or fixed to the bottom.

#### **Dive from a Boat**

This is a full-body dive retrieve from a boat platform. Teams begin on a free-floating boat. The dog leaps from the boat to dive underwater and retrieve a suspended article. For platform jumps, as long as the dog submerged on the first dive, the dog may continue to dive from a swim position to complete the retrieve within the time limit.

#### **About Submersion Training**

Dogs target underwater articles through surface scent, touch and ultimately by sight. *If you have a breed that sprouts a forelock, it's important to trim away or tie up hair that would otherwise impair the dog's vision.*



Photos by Deborah Lee Miller-Riley





Fluid pressure during submersions deeper than a few feet can inflict pain and harm canine ears. Dogs with ear, nose or eye inflammation, infection, or immune issues should be seen by a veterinarian before water training. A canine ear wash applied before and after swimming will reduce ear infections.

Work to keep your dog's mind in a state of play and far from the primal fear of drowning. Play hesitation is valuable information that demands trainers review the dog's health status, physical ability, biological and emotional needs.

#### Safety Gear

Canine gear consists of a harness that will not impede the dog's airway or cause pain if rescue or restraint is needed during dive training. Canine life jackets are optional. Collars are prohibited. Handlers must wear a life jacket and appropriate water footwear.

#### Water Platforms

The use of a MPG Water Platform is invaluable

when introducing a dog to submersion work in open water, but buckets, tubs and baby pools can be a place to start at home. How to build a MPG Water Platform is posted on the Nautical Dog Store page at [www.caninewatersports.com](http://www.caninewatersports.com).

#### Retrieve Articles

What the dog retrieves is not as important as the dog's desire to submerge for a variety of articles. How useful is a dog who only retrieves a training dummy? Water clarity and canine preference can dictate the size, weight, shape, material and color of retrieve articles. Just about anything that can sink or be suspended is acceptable for submersion training and testing. Suspended articles are buoyant articles anchored to a minimal weight through an adjustable line, which keeps the article suspended between the bottom and the surface.

#### Training Strategies

What motivates a dog to submerge? Here are some games to pique your dog's interest. Try one or more to teach that pleasure follows if the nose goes below!

**A basic retrieve requires the dog to know what is being sought, where to go to get it, to move on cue to the article and bring it back to the handler's hand.**





**What the dog retrieves is not as important as the dog's desire to submerge for a variety of articles.**

- Tease with a toy or piece of food. Chunks of meat are better than tidbits. As the dog moves to investigate, lower the lure an inch or two beneath the water surface. Release the lure when the dog's nose submerges.
- While the dog is watching, scatter chunks of meat in the water. Step away and let experimentation and food drive work for you.
- At a lake, tease your dog with her favorite lure, then run into the water and dive under. Her curiosity may have her joining you. If your dog loves balls, release a submerged tennis ball when the dog finds you - the ball will quickly pop to the surface adding extra excitement and interest in the game.
- Mechanical swimming fish and fuzzy toys on a string held wiggling beneath the surface will excite some dogs. If you have live fish at your water location, bait the fish into coming close to the surface and watch for canine interest. Take care you do not build an obsessive fish hunter — this can be a problem at a trial.
- Create social competition using a friendly, experienced diving dog. Lure the duo underwater and watch the novice for effort to follow. Release the lure while the nose is dunking.
- Target games can encourage submersion also. Ask for nose contact on a hand or remote target

submerged for a nose dunk. To speed learning, be sure reinforcement is delivered while dog is submerged.

## Moving on Down

When the dog is happily dunking her nose, encourage a muzzle poke. Then achieve eyes below. At ear depth be prepared to up the ante. The sensation of water, especially cold water, flooding the ear canal can be startling and annoying. Most dogs quickly get past the annoyance if you increase the lure stakes. Question ear health and structure if there is hesitation or refusal to participate.

Your dog might need to build *Submersion Stamina*. Repetitions should reflect this breath-holding goal. One to three submersions per session are fine in early training.

Predatory drive is a huge motivator in submersion games. Rev up your dog's desire for play and chase before asking the dog to submerge deeper. Teasing and playing on the surface, between dives, may increase the desire to pursue a toy or treat underwater.

Once you set a depth goal, keep it. If the dog refuses after a reasonable amount of time, end the game and move on to something else. Plan for success next time. Avoid lowering your standard (pushing the lure closer to the surface) if your dog refuses your target trial - doing so may teach her that hesitation results in an easier task.

Select a cue word that represents this new target destination, i.e. *dive, plunge, snorkel, beneath, duck, or scuba*. Once your dog is joyfully submerging her head, you may introduce the cue word by using it just before your dog dives.

## Developing the Submerged Retrieve.

A basic retrieve requires the dog to know what is being sought, where to go to get it, to move on cue to the article and bring it back to the handler's hand. The underwater retrieve adds a necessary submerge to the where in this behavior chain. To make the next learning step easy for your dog, she should have a reliable retrieve on land and a play-driven submerge in the water. Select some of your dog's favorite toys to be used as retrieve articles and reinforcers and move to the water.

Where you introduce the underwater retrieve is important. If you begin descent training at the shoreline and gradually move your article deeper, you will be training the creative dog to paw the article to shore. Instead, start in water elbow deep for the dog or stand the dog on a water platform placed in swim depth water.

From wade depth, submerge a platform or a bucket (bottom up) at a depth that will table the retrieve article for a nose depth dive. If you begin

Photos by Deborah Lee Miller-Riley



with a suspended article, place the weight at a depth that suspends the article just below the surface. Cue the retrieve with the dive word plus the retrieve signal. Reinforce generously when the article is delivered to hand.

If the dog paws the article off the table, the game ends and the opportunity to earn treats goes away for a while. From swim depth, place the dog on a MPG Water Platform submerged to a depth that will create a nose dive. Train the same as from wade depth.

Before building for depth, generalize this nose dive retrieve to other locations within the same body of water and other lakes if possible. Change start positions; sometimes begin with the shore on the left of the handler, sometimes on the right. Switch the dog's position; send from your right and then your left side. Change retrieve articles; vary by size, shape, texture, scent, and weight. Make speed an important criteria to your dog by giving high-value reinforcers for the fastest recoveries.

When the dog is quickly recovering the article, descent training may begin. You may gradually lower the article by (1) moving the platform, suspended article or bucket in to deeper water, or (2)

shortening the line on the suspended article. Train for recovery speed before changing depths.

### Polishing the behavior

With the dog next to your leg, wade in, stop at head submersion depth and cue your dog to wait. Toss the article about three feet in front of the dog and immediately send her for the retrieve. Did you get a fast recovery? Next, work on longer delays before sending. Change the dog's start side. Change the toss distance. Vary the team's orientation to the shoreline. Rehearse with a variety of retrieve articles. Watch and learn how sunlight, reflections, sun glare, wind direction, bottom texture, depth, water temperature and clarity effect your dog's speed. Set your dog up for success with this wisdom and go have a ducky good time below the surface. **DS**



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### Why We Train ...

- To minimize fears and maximize trust.*
- To ensure safety and freedom through cooperation.*
- To increase confidence through manners and domestic order.*
- To provide enrichment and play for emotional wellness.*
- To nourish mental and physical growth by facilitating challenges.*
- To strengthen healthy social behavior and guide innate ability.*
- To bear witness to moments of canine brilliance.*
- To share an awareness from which love grows.*



*Canine Water Sports*